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ABSTRACT

Immigrants leaving Vietnam through the Orderly Departure Program in Bangkok, Thailand, experience stress and difficulties very different from those endured by refugees fleeing by land or boat. The cultural orientation program addresses their needs to assimilate their loss, gain equilibrium, and get resettlement guidance and information. These refugees fall into two groups: those who will go directly to the United States and those who go to the Philippines for a 5-month refugee training program. The first group receives 9-12 hours of preparation, in which participants discuss their hopes and feelings, examine their expectations of Americans, look at cultural differences, study the cost of living and employment in the United States, prepare for new experiences such as the airplane flight and being new in school, discuss family and community life, learn where the United States is, and talk about culture shock. The second group participates in a 2- to 4-hour orientation session regarding the trip to and life in the Philippines center and on resettlement issues. Separate classes are provided for unaccompanied Amerasian minors, focusing on feelings and the experiences ahead. Staffing issues include resolution of intercultural stresses as well as working closely together to help anxious participants cope with stressful situations. (MSE)

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# EASING THE TRANSITION: TEACHING MIGRANTS IN THE ORDERLY DEPARTURE PROGRAM

Mariam Webster and Susan Belmont

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# passage

## a journal of refugee education

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# Easing the Transition: Teaching Migrants in the Orderly Departure Program

**Marian Webster and Susan Belmont**
*Orderly Departure Program, Bangkok, Thailand*

Individuals leaving Vietnam through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) experience stresses and difficulties quite different from those endured by refugees fleeing by land or boat. In order to assist these migrants to cope with the transition from Vietnam to the U.S. or to the refugee processing center, a brief cultural orientation program is carried out at Suan Plu Transit Center in Bangkok, Thailand. The following article describes how the program meets the special needs of these ODP students.

Immigrants and refugees leaving Vietnam under the U.S. Orderly Departure Program (ODP) take part in a brief intensive cultural orientation in Bangkok, Thailand.

The Orderly Departure Program, which operates under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, was developed in 1979 in an attempt to decrease the number of boat departures from Vietnam. Those desiring to leave Vietnam apply for exit permits; when the exit permit is received and they are approved by the U.S. ODP authorities, they are scheduled to fly out of the country. Some ODP migrants are admitted to the U.S. as refugees; others enter the country with another status, most often immigrant. The status of each individual applicant is determined according to U.S. immigration law.

The ODP orientation program, implemented by the Experiment in International Living and Save the Children under contract with the U.S. Department of State, has been under way since 1984. As of July 1986, 12,580 adults had completed this program. The program was originally designed to provide cultural orientation for adults between the ages of 16 and 55. This has changed, however, because of the increasing numbers of elderly immigrants and the special needs of the 6- to 12-year-olds who accompany their parents.

The refugees and immigrants in the Orderly Departure Program are Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese citizens of Vietnam from varying socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Some of them attempted boat escapes, failed, and were jailed. Others spent years in re-education camps. Still others worked odd jobs or clandestinely sold goods in the markets – the Vietnam government does not allow those with exit permits to hold a regular job.

The ODP students fall into two groups: One, primarily immigrants, travels directly to the U.S. The other group, refugees, goes to the Philippines for the five-month Overseas Refugee Training Program at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) in Bataan. The U.S.-bound group receives 9-12 hours of preparation; the Philippines-bound group has 3-4 hours of orientation to life at the PRPC.

For all ODP migrants, the process of leaving Vietnam is filled with bureaucratic uncertainty. The loss of family and friends who remain in Vietnam leaves new arrivals grief-stricken and disoriented. The departure also fills them with excitement, relief, and anxiety about the future. The orientation program seeks to address their need to assimilate the loss and regain equilibrium, as well as their need for resettlement guidance and information.

The following are the words of an immigrant at Suan Plu, the refugee transit center in Bangkok:

> After more than five years of staying for going abroad with a lot of expecting, hope, I was admitted to go to America to reunion with my relatives. Because of the time of waiting was too long so sometimes I felt hopeless. When it was announced that I had name in the list of flying I couldn't accept it as a true matter, until now it seems to be dream, a fragile dream. I had to endure two weeks of waiting before the leaving day. I was usually afraid that something could happen to postpone my departure. When I sat in the waiting room of the Vietnam airport, I saw a Vietnamese policeman run from place to place to find someone who must be arrested. My heart beat wildly. When I sat in the chair of the airplane I still feared. It is said that the good future only begins when your plane takes off. We flew Air France to Bangkok. I couldn't hold my tears, looking down saying goodbye and being thousands of miles away. The moment was wonderful but very sad. I was wishing I could have miracle to have my relatives and friends come along in the air where they can breathe. It was really a hard trip, it made me tired and I couldn't think, smile or ask for information . . . the day after I gradually regained health. In the night I remembered the old house, the loving godson, the friend and the relatives who still live in Vietnam and I wanted to cry. Nothing I could do for them, only my memory of them. I have been in Suan Plu for five days and the daily routine is normal but I am still very scared. I fear that the reality that I am in a wonderful land is a dream and when I wake up in the morning I will be in Vietnam. This is the most fearful thing in my life.

## ODP Program Design

### *Introductory Class*

On the first day of instruction, we warm up the group (and ourselves) by chatting informally before classes begin: Introductions are made and we ask the students how things are for them at Suan Plu. In the first class session, students discuss four topics: where they are from, what they will miss the most, the flight from Vietnam to Thailand and the feelings involved, and their hopes and dreams for the future. This sequence of subjects moves the students from the familiar (a Vietnam perspective) to the unfamiliar (a U.S. perspective). The following activity, suggested to us by professional trainer Dennis Hamilton, facilitates group interaction and cohesiveness as students talk about what leaving Vietnam has meant.

Students are divided into small groups of 10-12 persons, and each group is given a marker and a large piece of white paper divided into four sections, one for each topic. After discussing a topic, the group draws a picture illustrating their feelings about the subject. After everyone is finished, the pictures are taped to the wall and a representative from each group describes their picture and the conversation. This is a time to talk about loss and grieving and to begin the long process of putting the past into perspective. "The first subject of the class caused me to be touched and moved," one refugee said. "It was asking us about the trip. We were able to talk about how much people are still suffering in Vietnam. Through expressions of anger and hatred, many people cried."

After the first class, the classes become oriented specifically to the students' destination – the U.S. or the PRPC.

*Marian Webster helps a student explain his group's picture to the class.*

Photo by Charoensak "Kaew" Chongcharueyskul

### *U.S.-Bound Classes*

*Monday:* The group participates in a lively session, "Meeting Americans and Crossing Cultures." "What does an American look like?" is one question posed to the group. "Tall, blonde, green or blue eyes, fat with a large, long but high nose," is one of the typical descriptions given. "Do all Americans look like this?" the teacher responds. At this time, we talk about the different types of Americans they will see. The students learn that Americans belong to various ethnic groups, many of whose ancestors came to the U.S. as refugees or immigrants.

Through role plays, we look at both Vietnamese and U.S. customs. We act out Vietnamese customs such as squatting while waiting in public, crouching down when walking through a seated crowd, and displaying shyness when speaking with someone

(e.g., no eye contact). We talk about what these behaviors mean to the Vietnamese and how they might be interpreted in the U.S. Then we act out American customs, such as beckoning someone with a palm-up hand gesture or paying for a meal "dutch treat." The role plays allow the group to actually feel the "culture crossing." Then we discuss how the customs of a different culture can be misunderstood and create bad feelings.

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***"I fear that the reality that I am in a wonderful land is a dream and when I wake up in the morning I will be in Vietnam."***

***– A Vietnamese ODP immigrant in Suan Plu.***

---

*Tuesday:* In the "resettlement class" we begin by letting the groups do some research on the cost of living in the U.S. Each group is given paper, a marker, and a Sears catalog. They carry out different assignments, such as buying clothing for a family of four for winter, preparing a box to send to a family in Vietnam, buying things for the kitchen, or purchasing items they want. The students list the items with the prices, then calculate the total cost. After these are posted, the students are usually impressed with how expensive things are in America. We then discuss how they are going to get by; we talk about receiving help from their sponsors, relatives, the voluntary agencies, and public assistance. They also learn about repayment of the ICM loan,* paying into and receiving social security, and handling medical costs.

We begin our "jobs class" by showing a picture of a wallet with only one or two dollar bills in it and asking, "What will you do when your wallet looks like this?" Students then watch a slide show which describes entry-level jobs in the U.S., and we ask the question, "Where will you find these jobs?" Groups discover that in some ways job hunting in the U.S. is like job hunting was in Vietnam before 1975. The question, "What problems do you anticipate in your job search?" leads to issues of language, age, health, skill relevance, licensing in the U.S., and prejudice. The session ends with a role play of a job interview, focusing on the importance of punctuality, a firm handshake, prolonged eye contact, and appearing confident. Students are then encouraged to write a job resume itemizing their skills that may be transferable to the U.S. job market.

In the "education class," students see a slide show on children's education and then discuss the experience of being new in school and parent/teacher/student relationships. In addition, students learn about the educational options available for adults.

Tuesday is a long day ending with an entertaining video (in Vietnamese) that familiarizes the group with the airplane flight. We demonstrate the use of life vests and seat belts in a short session that also includes comfort on the airplane and how to communicate needs to the flight attendant, air-sickness, time changes, and how to deal with jet lag. We talk about the customs check at the port of entry in the U.S. and what documents will be required. At this time, we reiterate the importance of repaying the ICM travel loan.

*Wednesday:* We begin the class on "family" by asking, "What does a family in Vietnam look like?" and "What is important in your family?" This usually generates a lively discussion about male/female roles and children's place in the family. After putting notes about families in Vietnam on one side of the board, we fill the other half with characteristics of a family in the U.S. This session ends with a discussion of the two families' roles and the possible changes the Vietnamese family will face.

The "community lesson" includes slides of scenes of the U.S., especially of the inner city and of Vietnamese communities. This is usually an eye-opener for many of the ODP groups. As we show the many different ethnic groups living together, we discuss prejudice, stereotypes, and the experience of ethnic minorities in the U.S.

*Thursday:* In "geography," we post a U.S. weather map and give everyone a chance to tell where they are going in the U.S. This brings us close to the end of our classes. By this time, the group is very excited about departure, and we have a chance to field some general questions.

The last session is on "culture shock." It begins with the interpreter asking questions about how students were feeling at various points during the process of leaving Vietnam. As they respond to the questions, the interpreter charts the ups and downs of their feelings on a graph posted at the front of the room.

At the end, the graph usually looks something like this:

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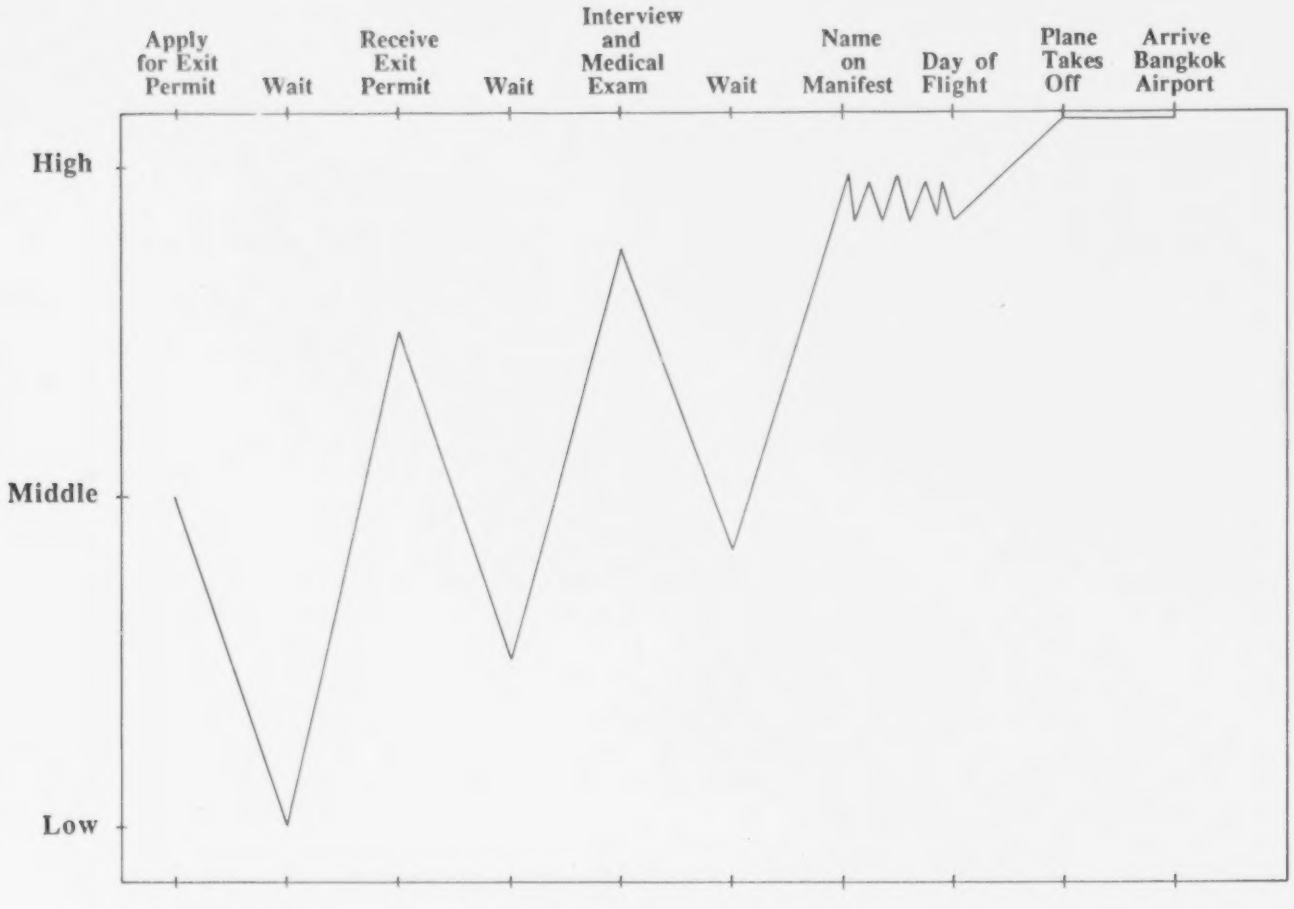
*ICM (Intergovernmental Committee for Migration) is responsible for transporting refugees to the United States. Each traveler signs a promissory note, agreeing to pay back the amount of his/her airline ticket, on a monthly basis. The voluntary agencies are responsible for collecting these repayments in the U.S.

# CULTURE SHOCK GRAPH




The instructor and the group then develop a comparison chart in red ink of refugees' possible reactions to future events in the U.S. The group then talks about the low periods on both charts. Referring to the first one, the teacher asks, "What did this feel like? What did you do to pull the lows into highs?" The idea is that there will be lows in the U.S., and students can use the same strategies there as they used in Vietnam to overcome depression.

The last session ends with a "closing," usually a personal statement from the teacher and the interpreter to the group. Vietnamese custom dictates that someone, usually an older and wiser member of the group, stands and formally thanks the instructors. We exchange addresses and hopes that we will see each other again. Often there is a sharing of Vietnamese and American songs.

*PRPC-Bound Classes*

Since classes begin Monday afternoon and the Philippines-bound group usually departs for Manila on Wednesday morning, we have chosen a curriculum of essentials: a two-hour slide show introducing the PRPC at Bataan, a video about the flight, and a discussion about the trip to Manila. Time permitting, there is also a class on resettlement that emphasizes the cost of living, the importance of learning English for getting a job, becoming more

independent from sponsors or relatives, and crossing cultures easily. We like to end the week with the same class on culture shock held for the U.S.-bound classes.

## Amerasian Minor Classes

There are separate classes for a small number of unaccompanied Amerasians. They and most other Amerasians carry with them a low self-esteem – the result of years of being branded "children of dust." Amerasians are second-class citizens in Vietnam, constantly insulted about their parentage, their poverty, and their lack of education. The purpose of our classes for unaccompanied Amerasian youth is to assist them in dealing with the trauma of leaving their families and to help them focus on what they can do to prepare to help themselves and their families in the future. The hope and belief in that eventual reunion bolsters many of these 12- to 17-year-olds.

The class usually begins with introductions, including "Who I am and how I'm feeling." Through sharing and listening, group cohesiveness is formed; supporting each other during this difficult time is emphasized. To help them deal with the uncertain present and future, we discuss living with a new family or group (since they will be placed in foster care), being new in school or in a neighborhood and making friends, expectations of Americans and sponsors, and ways of dealing with loneliness and fear. Students also learn about the airplane flight and U.S. schools; we teach a few survival English phrases for these and other situations.

## Program Staff

Meeting program objectives is challenging because of the scope of refugee needs, time constraints, and the austere environment of the Thai Immigration and Detention Center, where the program is located. Making decisions on content and methodology has required staff teamwork, flexibility, and endurance. At present, there is a staff of five. Three Vietnamese-Americans act as interpreters and assistant teachers. The two teachers are from the U.S., and one also acts as program coordinator. Consultants are welcomed as guest participants in the classroom and for staff development. For example, Marjorie Mueke, a consultant from the University of Washington in Seattle, helped us integrate group discussion of the grief process into the curriculum.

Refugee and immigrant volunteers work as librarians for the books and the growing supply of games (such as dominos and Chinese chess) available to those in transit. They also assist the program in distributing cultural orientation materials to arriving flights. When needed, we recruit additional volunteers to teach the classes for 6- to 12-year-olds.

Instructors and interpreters work as a team. In class and in lesson planning, the interpreter provides cultural information, and functions as a cross-cultural bridge between the Vietnamese migrants and the American instructor. As class begins, the instructor and the interpreter stand in front of the students, who sit on the floor. Because the class size and the room are large, the interpreter uses a microphone when translating the teacher's remarks into Vietnamese. The interpreter and teacher move about the classroom with the microphone. When a student speaks in Vietnamese, the interpreter translates quietly to the instructor. Ideally, the teaching pair models respect for each other and for each other's culture as they work together.

*An interpreter helps a student during a role play of a job interview.*

Photo by Charoensak "Kaew" Chongcharueyskul.

Working so closely together in the heat and in such a changing atmosphere can present many problems. Some issues are familiar to those working in resettlement: "How involved with the students should I get?" We have all felt the pull to give more of time and self than intended, to "burn out." Perhaps this is hardest for the Vietnamese interpreters with their special feelings and understanding for their compatriots. Another problem is the stress resulting from unexpected changes in departure schedules, which cause changes in classes. In addition, individuals are frequently called from class for processing by other agencies.

As Vietnamese and Americans working together, we are constantly reminded that customs and culture call for daily negotiation. Do we pay for lunch according to Vietnamese or American customs today? In staff meetings, are we going to approach an issue directly ("American") or indirectly ("Vietnamese")? We've discovered we can do either. With knowledge of American culture as well as their own, our ODP students will have a choice, too.

***Marian Webster*** *is coordinator of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) Orientation Program in Bangkok. Living in Thailand since 1981, she has worked in the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp as a psychiatric nurse with the American Refugee Committee, and has worked with the ODP since 1983. She holds an MS in child psychiatric nursing from the University of Maryland.*

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